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AUTHOR Cooney, Frank
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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the past five years of student class evaluations at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC). Included in the review are the Instructional Assessment System (IAS) student class evaluations, the results from the new, non-returning and graduating student surveys, and observations on the student comments in those surveys. The average IAS student class evaluation score for the entire college has remained consistently high during the past five years. Students rate their satisfaction with instructors even higher than the classes as a whole. In the fall semester 1998, 94 percent of all classes were rated as "good" or better and 6 percent were rated as less than "good." Twenty-three percent received an outstanding rating of 4.50 and better on the 5-point scale. The student survey responses support the very positive IAS results. The open-ended student comments in the mail surveys differ from the student comments in the IAS class ratings. The survey comments are made by only a few respondents and tend to be negative. The IAS comments are more numerous and reflect the very good class ratings. The SLCC results are similar to comparable results in the state of Utah, undergraduate IAS results at the University of Washington, and at two other community colleges. (VWC)

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A Five-Year Review of Student Class Evaluations at Salt Lake Community College



Department of Administrative Services
Office of Planning and Research

Prepared by
Frank Cooney, Ph.D.
Research Coordinator
December 1999

A Review of the Student Class Evaluations at Salt Lake Community College

Summary

The following report reviews the past five years of student class evaluations at Salt Lake Community College. Included in the review are the Instructional Assessment System (IAS) student class evaluations, the results from the new, non-returning and graduating student surveys and observations on the student comments in those surveys.

The average IAS student class evaluation score for the entire College has remained consistently high during the past five years.

Students rate their satisfaction with instructors even higher than the classes as a whole.

In the fall semester 1998, 94 percent of all classes were rated as "good" or better and 6 percent were rated as less than "good." Twenty-three percent received an outstanding rating of 4.50 and better on the 5-point scale.

The student survey responses support the very positive IAS results with, for example, 86 percent of those in the 1998-99 graduating class survey stating that they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the overall quality of the classes they had taken.

The open-ended student comments in the mail surveys differ from the student comments in the IAS class ratings. The survey comments are made by only a few respondents and tend to be negative. The IAS comments are more numerous and reflect the very good class ratings. Both positive and negative comments must be placed in the context of the total student evaluations.

The SLCC results are similar to comparable results in the state of Utah, undergraduate IAS results at the University of Washington and at two other community colleges.

The concluding discussion observes that class evaluation formats such as the IAS questionnaire are less capable of distinguishing among high levels of quality in classes and teachers than they are able to identify "less than good" classes and instructors with real problems that need immediate attention.

Introduction

Salt Lake Community College [SLCC] systematically surveys students for their evaluation of their academic experience. These experiences vary and reflect the values, attitudes, past experiences and educational expectations of the student body. Student evaluations are an essential part of the larger comprehensive assessment of the quality of education at SLCC. But there are many questions about course objectives, subject matter, textbooks, etc., that students are not qualified to answer. The results from student evaluations, therefore, must always be considered as a partial and limited assessment of teaching and learning.

Student class evaluations must be understood as just one part of the multiple indicators of quality in teaching and learning the components of quality education.

Student input comes from multiple and diversified sources.

SLCC adopted the Instructional Assessment System [IAS] for student class evaluations in 1994. This set of tested and validated questionnaires was developed by University of Washington's Office of Educational Assessment. The consistent use of the standardized evaluation questionnaires results in evaluation scores which can be compared over the last five years. In addition, graduating, fall to spring semester non-returning, and new students are surveyed every year and asked for an overall evaluation of their classroom experiences.

Every SLCC student is given multiple opportunities to comment on any aspect of their college experience. Open-ended comments are written by students as part of the IAS evaluation program and on all the student surveys.

These efforts will be reviewed in this report.

Background

The SLCC student class evaluation program is conducted year-round with primary emphasis in the fall semester. In the fall semester, one-third of the tenured faculty, all full-time non-tenured faculty and all adjunct faculty are evaluated. It is a major effort. In fall 1999, 26,102 individual evaluations were obtained from students in 2,046 classes. These are typical numbers during the past three years.

While the IAS evaluation questionnaire is comprised of more than 30 questions, two questions best summarize the evaluation results. The first question asks: "The class as a whole was: ____." The second question is: "The instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter was: ____."

Students are asked to choose one of six possible evaluation responses. The responses and their associated numerical score are: excellent=5.00, very good=4.00, good=3.00, fair= 2.00, poor=1.00 and very poor=0.00. All of the student responses are averaged for each question.

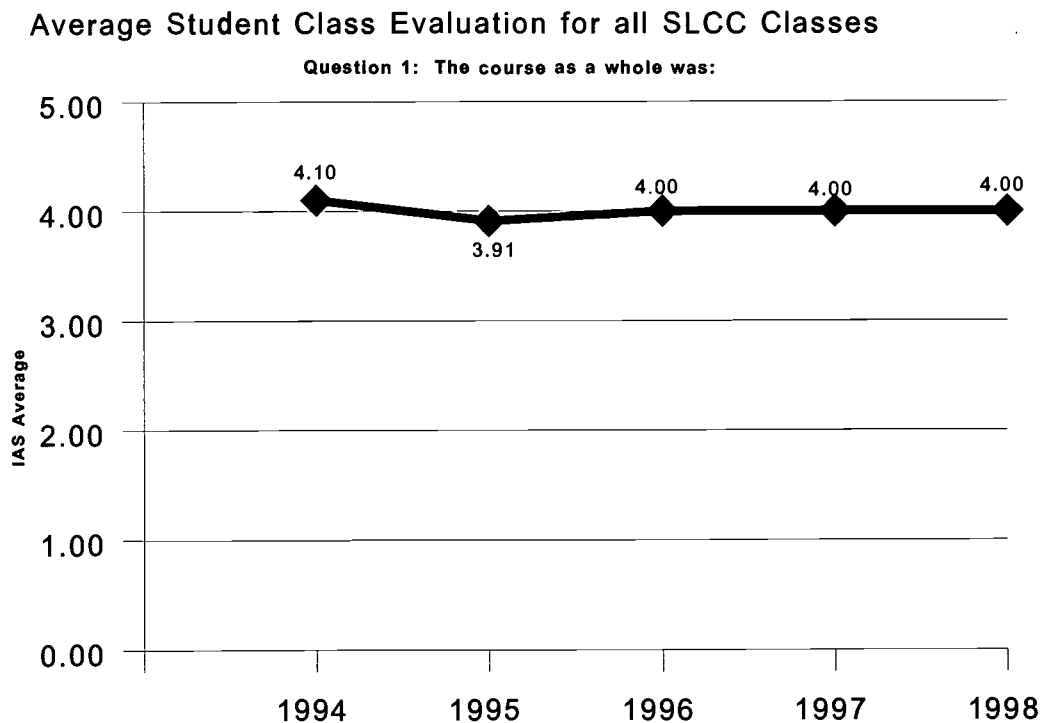
An average score of 5.00 would mean that everyone in the class responded "excellent" to that question. A score of

3.00 means that the average response from all the students in the class averaged good (3.00).

Findings

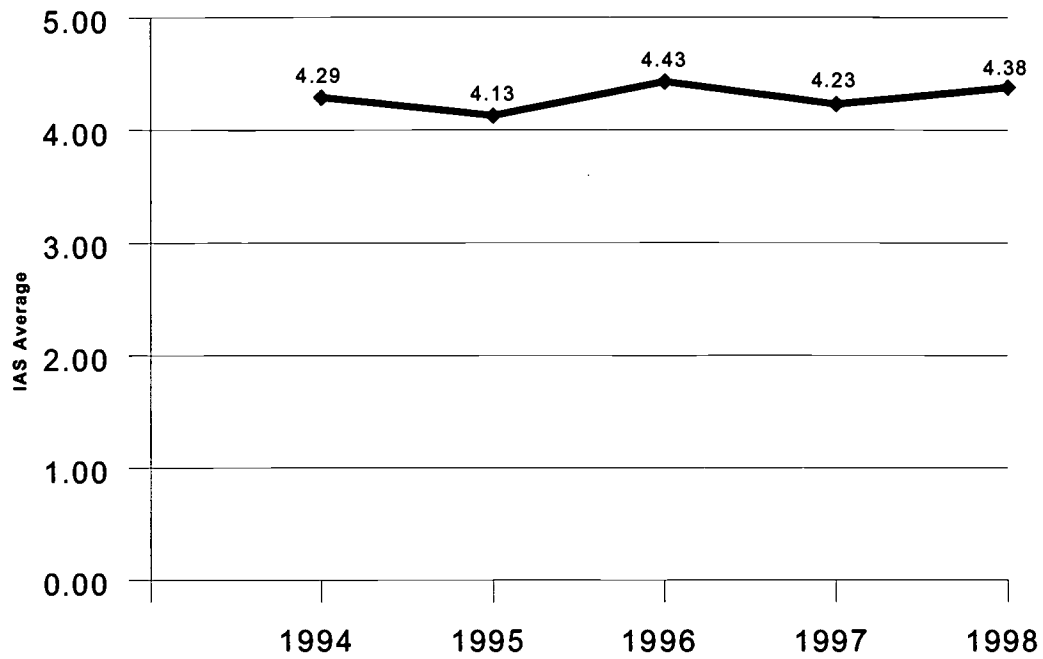
How do the student evaluations for the entire College compare in the last five years?

The average evaluation score for all classes has varied very little from fall 1994 through the fall semester 1998. The IAS questionnaires were administered for the first time in 1994. The following line charts present the annual class average ratings for IAS questions one and four. For the past three years the rating for classes as a whole has been exactly 4.00, the "very good" rating level. The ratings for instructors has consistently been above 4.00.



Average Student Class Evaluation for all SLCC Classes

Question 3: The Instructor's Contribution to the Course was:



Six-Point Scale: excellent = 5.00; very good = 4.00; good = 3.00; fair = 2.00; poor 1.00; very poor = 0.00

Six-Point Scale:

excellent = 5.00; very good = 4.00; good = 3.00; fair = 2.00; poor 1.00; very poor = 0.00

The IAS student class evaluation is the most comprehensive student assessment of SLCC's quality of classes and teaching. Consequently, these results are the most representative of the entire student body.

What about Percentage Distributions?

Averages are good for simplifying a large amount of data and allow for quick comparisons. But averages provide no depth of understanding and may dilute significant facts. A valuable next step in analyzing the results of the student class evaluations is to transfer the averages into aggregate groups and calculate percentages for each group.

For each of the two questions, all the class average evaluation scores were arranged in the following five groups with the specified average score ranges: all scores less than 3.0 (less than "good"), 3.00 - 3.49, 3.50 - 3.99, 4.00 - 4.49, 4.50 to 5.00.

The following table provides the number and percentage of classes in each of the five aggregate evaluation groups for question one in fall semester 1999.

Ninety-four percent of all the fall classes were rated by the students as "good" or better. Fifty-five percent of the classes were rated as "very good" or "excellent." Six percent of the classes were evaluated in the lowest group (those with scores of less than "good"- 3.00.)

| Class Average Student Evaluations on Question 1: "The course as a whole was:" | | |
|--|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Group Score | Number of Courses | Percentage of Courses |
| 4.50 and over | 471 | 23.0 |
| 4.00 to 4.49 | 661 | 32.3 |
| 3.50 to 3.99 | 498 | 24.3 |
| 3.00 to 3.49 | 294 | 14.4 |
| Less than 3.00 | 122 | 6.0 |

Based on 2,046 fall semester 1998 SLCC class sections.

As good as the class evaluations were for the class as a whole, they are even higher for the instructor's contribution.

Seventy-four percent of the instructors were rated as "very good" to "excellent."

Ninety-five percent as "good" or better.

Five percent of the instructors were rated as less than "good."

| Class Average Student Evaluation on Question 3: "The instructor's contribution to the course was:" | | |
|---|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Group Score | Number of Courses | Percentage of Courses |
| 4.50 and over | 953 | 46.6 |

| | | |
|----------------|-----|------|
| 4.00 to 4.49 | 559 | 27.3 |
| 3.50 to 3.99 | 259 | 12.7 |
| 3.00 to 3.49 | 173 | 8.5 |
| Less than 3.00 | 102 | 5.0 |

Based on 2,046 fall semester 1998 SLCC class sections.

Have the Percentages Changed Significantly During the Last Five Years?

No.

The following table shows that, on the evaluation of "classes as a whole," in every year since 1994, the percentage of classes rated as "good" or better varied only between 93 percent to 95 percent.

| Percentage Distribution of SLCC Student Class Evaluation Averages: from 1994 through 1998. | | | | | |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Class Average Student Rating | 1994 % | 1995 % | 1996 % | 1997 % | 1998 % |
| Good to Excellent | 94.3 | 92.8 | 95.4 | 93.4 | 94.0 |
| Less than Good | 5.7 | 7.2 | 4.6 | 4.6 | 6.0 |

Based on more than 2,000 classes per year, except 1995. Response choices were: excellent, very good, good, fair, poor and very poor.

Other SLCC Data

Graduating, fall to spring semester non-returning, and new students are surveyed every year and asked for an overall evaluation of their classroom experiences. Almost 3,500 students participated in the three principal student surveys in the 1998-99 academic year. These surveys are totally independent of the IAS class evaluations.

The student survey results further substantiate the high IAS individual class results. The survey results have also varied little from survey to survey during the past five years. The results from the 1999 New Student Survey are indicative and shown in the following table. The results are based on replies from 813 students who enrolled at

SLCC for the first time in the fall semester 1998. Response choices ranged from very satisfied to very dissatisfied.

| Fall Semester 1999 New Student Survey Results. Percent of survey respondents indicating they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" on Questions related to academic program quality. | |
|--|-------------------------|
| Questions | Percent Positive |
| "Your Class Sizes are Conducive to Learning" | 94 |
| "The Quality of the Courses you are Taking" | 87 |
| "Ability to Enroll in Desired Classes" | 85 |
| "The Friendliness of Faculty and Their Response to Student Need" | 85 |
| "Timely Feedback from your Instructors on How You are Doing in Class" | 64 |

In general, the remaining 10 percent to 15 percent of the responses are split between "uncertain" and "dissatisfied."

While almost two-thirds are satisfied, the percentage dissatisfied on timely feedback from instructors is worth looking into further and may be an area where improvement can be made.

The results from the other student surveys are similar. For example, in the 1998-99 graduating class survey, 85.6 percent said they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" overall with their SLCC educational experience. In the non-returning student survey, 82.5 percent stated that they were satisfied with the quality of the courses they had taken. The very positive evaluation of their academic experiences at SLCC indicates that dissatisfaction with course quality is not a major factor for leaving college for the survey respondents.

Open-Ended Student Comments

Asking for student comments is a reflection of an educational institutions willingness to evaluate and openness to change and improvement. But evaluation of open-ended student comments needs to be balanced by the evaluation results from all the students.

Every SLCC student is given multiple opportunities to comment on any aspect of their college experience. Comment sheets are provided with every IAS class questionnaire (more than 26,000 were filled in fall 1999) and thousands of comments are received on the classes being evaluated.

All of the student surveys also asked for comments and suggestions for improvement.

The IAS class comments are returned to the class instructor to assist them in course and teaching improvement. The survey comments are reported in the various annual survey reports. The SLCC web-page version of the reports do not contain the student comments.

The student comments on academic subjects must be placed in the context of the survey results. Is a glowing praise or cutting criticism a reflection of how all, or almost all, of the students in a class feel? The best way to answer that question is to compare the comment to the student evaluations for all classes or from the specific class.

The IAS survey comments and the survey sample comments tend to be different. The comments in the IAS evaluation reflect the specific class evaluation statistical results. Classes with high-average evaluations receive few, if any, negative comments.

This is not true in the sample surveys. As most people know who have read those comments, the negative comments stand out. But only a few of all survey respondents comment and some of the comments are multiple comments from one person. For example, in the fall semester 1998 new student survey, there were 87 comments, of which 44 percent were negative. But these 87 comments represent less than 87 respondents out of the 813 students who responded to the survey.

In addition to the need to place the student comments in the context of the survey results, the comments themselves must be read with caution, remembering that some are true, some are not true and a number are true but subjective perspectives on a situation upon which other students would have a different perspective.

Comparative Analysis

SLCC students give high marks to their classes and even higher marks to their instructors. Although methodologies differ, these marks are similar to other schools in the state.¹ At Utah Valley State College, the average score for overall quality of courses was 4.02 on a five-point scale (versus 4.00 at SLCC). At Utah State University, 92 percent of the classes were rated as good or better (versus 94 percent at SLCC).

IAS student class evaluations are used at more than 40 two- and four-year schools across the country. A comparison was made between the SLCC IAS class rating averages and the IAS lower division class ratings at the University of Washington. The average on question one - quality of classes as a whole: UW: 4.00, SLCC: 4.00. The average on question three- the instructor's contribution to the course: UW: 4.49, SLCC: 4.25.

¹Class and faculty comparative ratings are taken from the *USHE 1997 Biennial Higher Education Assessment and Accountability Report*. Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. December 11, 1997.

The Office of Educational Assessment [OEA] at the University of Washington provided data from two other community colleges using the IAS in order to permit a comparative analysis with SLCC results. The two comparison colleges are anonymous and the time periods considered are similar. The number of class evaluations included in the analysis are: Rural CC 997; Suburban CC 1250; SLCC 2892. These numbers suggest that the other two schools are smaller in enrollment than SLCC.

The rating for classes as a whole are quite similar at the three community colleges with the total average rating around the 4.00 score for "very good". At all three schools, the percentage of classes rated less than "good" is below 10 percent.

| A Comparison of Percentile Ratings at Three Community Colleges on IAS Question 1: "The Course as a whole was:" | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| Community College | Average Rating of the Lowest 10 Percent of Classes | Average College Rating (50 th Percentile) | Average Rating of the Top Ten Percent (90 th Percentile) |
| Rural CC | 3.00 | 3.92 | 4.67 |
| Suburban CC | 3.12 | 3.95 | 4.63 |
| SLCC | 3.11 | 4.00 | 4.71 |

The instructors at all three schools are rated highly, between 4.28 and 4.38 on the five point scale with the highest possible score 5.00 signifying "excellent."

| A Comparison of Percentile Ratings at Three Community Colleges on IAS Question 3: "The instructor's contribution to the course was:" | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| Community College | Average Rating of the Lowest 10 Percent of Classes | Average Total Rating (50 th Percentile) | Average Rating of the Top Ten Percent (90 th Percentile) |
| Rural CC | 3.17 | 4.30 | 4.87 |
| Suburban CC | 3.25 | 4.28 | 4.83 |
| SLCC | 3.30 | 4.38 | 4.89 |

The SLCC results in this comparison provided by the OEA are a subset of the SLCC results used in this report and therefore differ slightly from other statistics in this report.

Discussion

One cannot help but notice that the student class evaluation scores at all five colleges are quite high with the instructors rated higher than the courses. What might explain these results? The student class evaluation ratings are made in the social psychological context which includes the student's values, attitudes, expectations and past classroom experiences. The high ratings suggest that the classes evaluated were compatible with the values, attitudes and expectations brought by the students to these classes. Furthermore, these classes are very good relative to their past classroom experiences. As a person's experience with a situation increases, there is a tendency for their expectations to become more precise, demanding and discriminating. In addition, student attitudes toward academic goals and achievement vary among higher education institutions. Social psychological theory would suggest that students who had spent a year at one of the nation's elite liberal arts colleges would have a different evaluative frame of reference for these community college classes.

The findings in national research that class evaluations are affected by: 1) why a student is taking a course (e.g., required versus personal choice- general education requirement versus student's major field of study) and 2) the nature of the course (e.g., physical and biological sciences versus social sciences) support the social psychological interpretation of student class ratings.

The higher ratings for instructors over the classes as a whole suggests a number of ideas. One is that the instructor is not blamed for any deficiencies observed in the class situation. Another is that it seems to be harder for college students to criticize real people compared to institutional situations.

It has been frequently observed by this researcher that a student evaluator may give a "very good" rating to an instructor in spite of some teaching/class deficiency noted by the student. This suggests that some students were not that demanding in their expectations or discriminating in their evaluation.

As noted above, the reason for enrollment and course subject are also related to evaluation ratings. To a significant extent, comparing scores from social science classes to the physical science and math classes is like comparing apples and oranges. In some cases, a class evaluation score of 4.35 in the former subjects could be compared favorably to a score of 3.85 in the latter subjects.

The high "average" evaluation at SLCC (e.g., 4.38) means that there is very little statistical room to distinguish the "very good" from the "excellent."

On the other hand, I have found that low student ratings are invariably tied to comments about specific serious class/instructor problems.

This leads to the conclusion that class evaluation formats such as the IAS questionnaire are less capable of distinguishing among high levels of quality in classes and teachers than they are able to identify "less than good" classes and instructors with real problems that need immediate attention.

Student class evaluations are one part of the measurement of student satisfaction. There are many other questions which need to be asked to delve further into questions about SLCC's quality of education. The AACC Core

Indicators of Institutional Effectiveness² represent an excellent starting point for such an assessment. Examples of these indicators include: successfully developing individual math and English skills to the college level, completing the objective of transferring to a four-year school and successfully obtaining employment in a training related field. These indicators reflect the many types of educational efforts and many types of student learning needs at a large comprehensive community college. Student satisfaction with classes is one part of that big picture.

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²*Community Colleges: Core Indicators of Effectiveness*. 1994. American Association of Community Colleges. Washington D.C.



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